

MACAULAY'S THIRD CHAPTER

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Macaulay spoke of the third chapter as the most difficult part of his task. A great part of the difficulty lay in the character of his materials. The economic and social history of England had been very little studied compared with its political history. Some works of solid value were available, such as Eden's State of the Poor, Macpherson's Annals of Commerce, and so on ; but there was a great lack of good monographs dealing with various parts of his subject. To-day monographs exist which contain the materials required for the revision of Macaulay's conclusions, and would enable a modern historian to compile an account of England at a given date with greater facility and certainty. Not only was the accessible evidence on social and economic subjects unsifted and undigested when Macaulay wrote, but much evidence of importance which is now in print was then inaccessible. Hence Macaulay had to utilise for his description of England shreds of evidence collected from all sorts of authorities, good, bad, and indifferent. He collected and employed what he termed ' gleanings ' and ' fragments of truth ', which other historians had deemed of no value.¹ Croker in his review censured this : he said that the third chapter was like an old curiosity shop, into which the knick-knacks of a

couple of centuries are promiscuously jumbled
, and complained that some of Macaulay's references
were to
eighteenth-century authorities, and therefore
not properly
applicable to 1685.² This criticism is true,
but in the
absence of adequate contemporary authorities
it is legitimate to employ with due caution authorities a
little earlier
or a little later in date. The question is
simply whether
the historian employs them with sufficient
care.

¹ Miscellaneous Writings (1860), i. 278.

- Quarterly Review, lxxxiv. 579.